

SERMON TO THE BIRDS

there is a little painting that hangs over the headboard of my bed, about the size of one of those trays a waiter brings to your table with the check on it. the scene is of st. francis of assisi giving a sermon to the birds that have gathered about him. the birds are very attentive, and st. francis is holding his hands in a manner that would signify that he is also giving them his blessing. there is another man in the painting, dressed in similar monk's clothing, but he is without a halo, so apparently he has not reached the status of sainthood, and i assume that if he were alone the birds would scatter in every direction at the sight of him. anyway, since i was given this painting, many years ago now, i've been trying to locate a picture of the original in an art book, but as yet i've had no success. my painting was done by a man who paints copies and sells them for a living. he showed me some of his copies next to pictures of the originals and i can vouch for the fact that he was enormously talented at his craft, and so i'd be tempted to say that the painting i own is without a doubt flawlessly identical. i met this painter one summer while living at a motel, right after my divorce. he was well over six feet tall, with red beard, full head of hair, dazzling blue eyes. one morning he needed a ride to a neighboring town to the west, and so i gave him a lift, and when we were parting he gave me this painting of st. francis. on the back of it he signed his name, along with some brief words of thanks. my friends know that this is a copy, obviously, and this being the case never do they pay much attention to it. but the painting is dear to me, partially because the painter was able to travel about doing these paintings, selling them to people who didn't care that they were copies. in his belongings he had his art history book, and he'd proudly show you the paintings he loved to make copies of, the ones which sold well over and over again. the whole idea didn't bother me in the least. actually i was very impressed with the level of skill he had reached. not only that, but he was living off of these things, traveling the open road, quite free and pleasantly easygoing. i was thrilled when he gave me one of his paintings. i had walked him up to his room at the inn, and before going down to the bar he had taken out a number of his paintings and placed them on the bed. instantly the room was transformed to another age. that of the old masters, and all i could see in them was the possibilities of so much more endless wandering. he had the smile of a simpleton. he was the happiest of painters. i shook with envy.